

Collaboration Avoids Duplicating Family Traditions

by Karen Stephens

To enhance identity, promote unity, and to rejoice in the beauty of life's seasonal changes, cultural groups have always created holidays and festivals for celebration. Helping children and families honor those customs forges lasting bonds between the generations. The traditions give young and old alike a tangible way to demonstrate commitment to family and shared community values. Over the years, most holidays have been celebrated primarily with immediate and extended family. In contemporary life that has changed. Children are now more likely to experience holiday festivities in multiple group settings. And more often than not, the holidays are observed in very similar, if not downright repetitive and redundant ways.

Early childhood staff often get a head start at children's holidays. With flourish, they embroider rooms with crepe paper streamers and banners, collect piggyback songs specifically tuned to "the day," and make sure every story time features a book from the holiday line-up. Attending to every detail, they make sure snacks are served on color-coordinated accessories befitting the season. I admit that enthusiasm can be charming. And it can add sparkle to long child care days. At first blush, all that tender loving attention doesn't sound like a bad thing. But when examined closer, it does give me pause.

As in all things wonderful, too much of a good thing is still just too much. Increasingly I wonder how holiday preparations at child care affect how families celebrate time-honored traditions at home. After month long journeys into holiday-land at child care, are children bored with the hoopla at home? Or worse, do children feel let down when the real day comes along and parents can't make it fit the big billing it received? Are children over-stimulated and over-stressed by endless holiday hyperbole? Are children ever able to experience a cozy sense of holiday calm? By drawing out excitement, are we actually making children more hyper and less joyful?

And how are parents affected? Do "over the top" decoration and celebration efforts discourage parents from taking the effort to create festive holidays at home? Are we making parents feel they must compete with the flourish of professional child care teachers? Do parents using child care have to forfeit the chance to see their child's delightful reactions to first traditional experiences?

To maintain balance, children and families need moderation — any time of year, but especially during holidays. To provide that, child care staff must reflect on their daily practices.

A fundamental question each program should answer is which holiday activities should be sacred unto the family alone, and which should be privy to the far more public audience of child care. We must consciously decide why we celebrate specific holidays along with families. From there, we can search out the most authentic and beneficial way to conduct celebrations so we avoid bias and stereotype. Whatever holidays we choose to observe, surely creative staff can discover ways to avoid duplicating family celebrations.

Holiday activities that take up valuable childhood time should not only be well intentioned, they should be well thought-out. By doing so we can encourage — rather than undermine — parents as they provide children with a nurturing and stable family life. Supplement experiences, don't supplant them. Add to enjoyment, don't take it over. Complement family traditions, don't re-create them. Pave the way to holidays, don't steal the crescendo. Plan with families, not for them. Enrich family experiences, don't replace them. Strive to delight, not to overwhelm. Engage, but don't exhaust. Strive to expand, broaden, and relate rather than duplicate.

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